

Latin America and Development

My Lords, perhaps I may say how delighted I am to be the prelude to the maiden speech of the noble Lord, Lord Liddle, and how much we look forward to his contributions to the House and admire the alacrity with which he has engaged with the business of the House today.

The noble Viscount, Lord Montgomery, is famous for his championing of Latin America, and today is an opportunity for us to share in his enthusiasm. It is excellent that within the first weeks of the coalition Government, we should have had a debate on the millennium development goal of universal private education and now, today, a debate on developments in Latin America—a continent where, in spite of its great economic progress and cultural achievements, 44 per cent of its population still live in poverty. Although Brazil is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and an increasingly important player on the international stage, Latin America is a region of marked contrasts and extremes. Seventy-five per cent of the population of Latin America live in expanding urban areas. The urban poor live in vast cities with low incomes and poor access to clean water and sanitation.

The rural poor live in remote areas with inadequate infrastructure and little law enforcement. I was very heartened to read the coalition Government's paper, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government—Freedom, Fairness, Responsibility*. In it, we read this commitment: "We will support reform of global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in order to increase the involvement of developing nations". That work is long overdue.

Travelling in Latin America and Central America, I have come across stories of the developing nations feeling disempowered by the international bodies. In Honduras, I listened to local people resisting the pressure from international bodies to divide up their forests under the slogan of land rights, saying that they would rather keep them in common ownership and live their traditional way of life owning the forest as a community. I have sailed up the Patuka river in a dug-out canoe; I have flown over the Mosquitia rain forest; and I have seen the courageous resistance of native people resisting both the illegal logging and the international pressure to change their way of life fundamentally. What is the Government's strategy to ensure that the voice of developing nations is heard in these international bodies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund? It would be wonderful if in 2010, as we mark the bicentenary of the independence movement, we could see real progress in that direction.

In the past 50 years Central America has lost 80 per cent of the rain forest. Globally every minute we lose an area of rain forest the size of 15 football pitches. Whatever view noble Lords take of the changing climate, this is simply unsustainable.

One of the most forest-ravaged regions of the world is Latin America. A few years ago I was in Brazil on a symposium with leading scientists and religious leaders looking at the future of the Amazon rain forest. Under the leadership of President Lula, much is being done to protect the biodiversity of the region and to ensure that the rain forest is preserved as a global utility. This cannot be done by Latin America alone; it requires international agreement. We came very near to it at Copenhagen but then fell short of securing such an agreement.

Our eyes now turn to the UNFCCC in Cancun later this year but the voices of Latin America must be heard as loudly as the consuming nations.

I pay tribute to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales for his rain forest initiative. He visited Latin America last year, and his insistence on bringing them to the table as equal partners in his initiative offers a model for international co-operation and agreement. Will the Government approach the Cancun conference with a full briefing from those involved in the Prince's rain forest initiative? I believe that that would be a major contribution to the development and well-being of Latin America.

The forests are worth more alive than dead. If they die, so will Latin America, but if they live, that continent will flourish as will the whole world because the forests are indeed the lungs of the earth.

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